

2016

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**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in south central Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teanaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali) and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrub steppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is probably best known for elk. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 11,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are over 5,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunity in District 8. Yakima County is near the top of the list in the harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove, #3 for both duck and chukar, #4 for pheasant, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many areas to choose from. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the freeway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which has gone to a [Hunt by Reservation System](#). West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000-acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, huns, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys are a relative newcomer to the district. Birds were first introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teanaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in the Washington State. While it is still difficult to draw a permit to hunt, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip. Rams are in rut mid-October through November, when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

Important Access Changes: For the 2016-17 hunting season, two changes have occurred. Access to the Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg will be going to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits. To watch the video and register, go to

http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/hunt/292/. There are three time periods for registration. The number of people is unrestricted for the periods before and after the modern firearm elk seasons. For the modern firearm elk season, registration is restricted to 50 people per day. Those failing to get one of the 50 spots can drive through the facility, but can't stop and hunt.

Required identification for access to Yakima Training Center (YTC) has changed. A Washington State driver's license is still required to drive on post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification. For more information on approved form of identity, orientation, and other rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

ELK



This district is the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader. GMUs 328 and 329 recently opened for both archery and muzzleloader hunters. In 2015, archery general season success in GMUs 328 and 329 was double that of modern firearm and most other archery GMUs.

Antlerless harvest in 2015 was the highest in recent history. This was the result of large numbers of permits and a later than normal season. The high harvest was followed by a surprisingly

severe winter. Snow depths were not excessive, but persisted for months. Elk could not easily access grasses and moved low in search of woody browse and open slopes. Fairly large numbers of elk found orchards and hay barns. Over 500 damage/kill permits were issued and over 70 elk were hit on I-90 east of Ellensburg. Modest numbers of elk also appear to have died from winter starvation. There are still plenty of elk in the herds, just not as many as 2015.

For many big game hunters in eastern Washington, drawing a special permit in the quality elk category is the ultimate opportunity. That certainly applies to District 8, where the majority of quality elk permits are available in the south-central part of the state. Our advice to most hunters who come here is to continue to hunt the general elk season for spikes, but keep putting in for special permit hunts and accruing bonus points, so when they do draw a quality elk permit, they will already know the landscape. Quality elk hunting in this part of the state includes a very good chance of seeing several mature bulls in a season.

Modern firearm elk hunting success in this district is often related to migration/weather. Harvest in the upper elevations tends to be relatively stable, but when some elk move into lower, more open elevations, overall harvest increases. The 2016 modern firearm season is October 29 – November 6.

Although a few hunters seem to believe the elk have all moved to Mt. Rainer during the fall hunting season, the reality is that most of the 11,000 elk in the Yakima herd are in units open to hunting (Figure 2). Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.

Within the Colockum herd, note that general antlerless permits in GMUs 328 and 329 run November 4 (Friday) – 8 (Tuesday after general spike ends). The permit hunters still have the weekend and a few days after spike hunters have left the area.

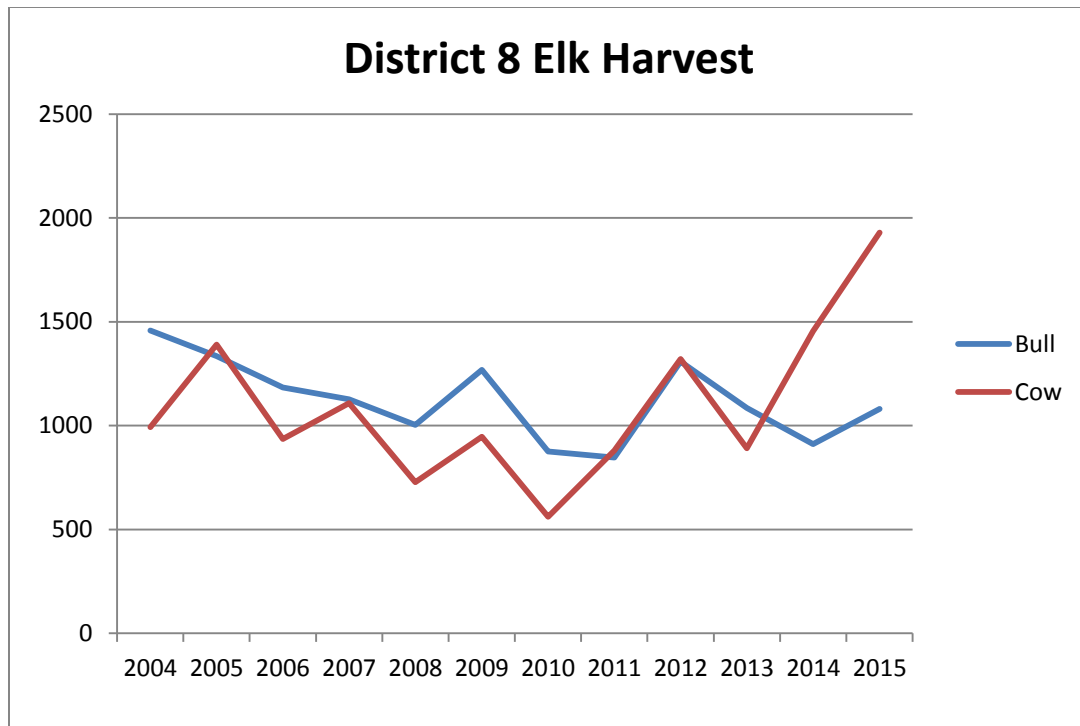


Figure 1. District 8 elk harvest.

Figure 2

**Yakima Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations
during September & October**

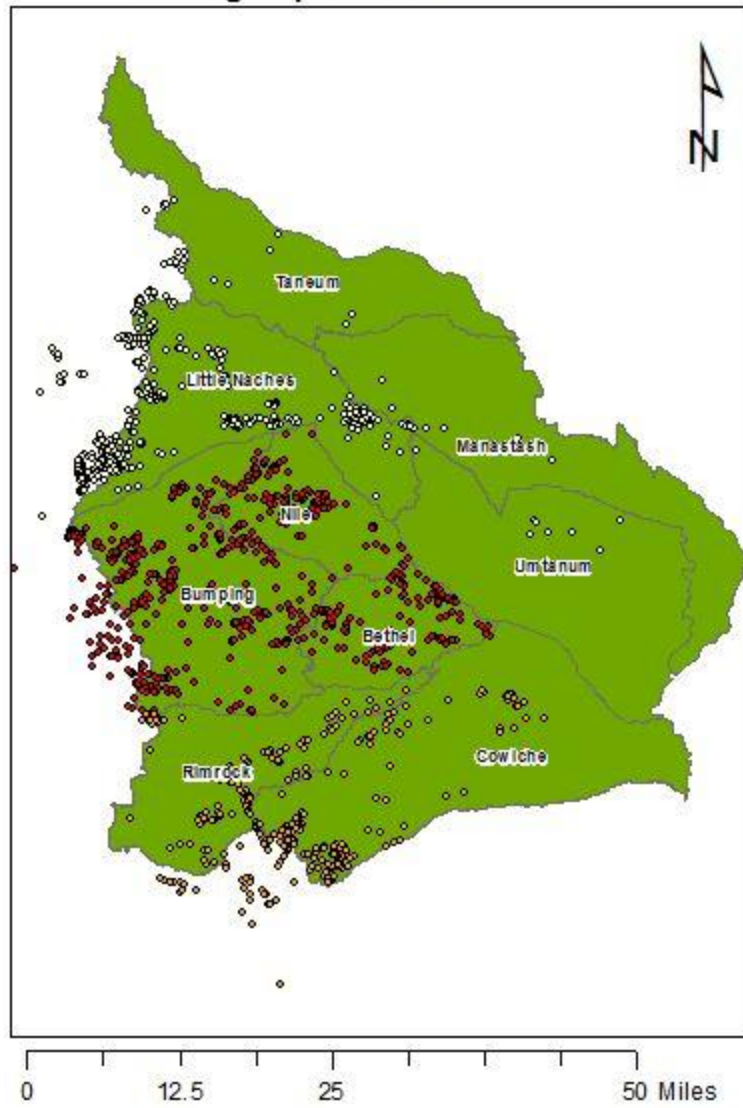


Figure 2. Yakima elk herd collared female elk locations during September and October.

DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 has been down from historic highs for a number of years. The average hunter success the last five years has been 8 percent compared to a statewide average of 28 percent. Following a sharp decline from 2004-2006, the harvest has been relatively static (Figure 3). There was an increase in harvest in 2015 following three mild winters with good fawn recruitment. Unfortunately, the hot, dry summer of 2015 was followed by a relatively hard winter. Approximately one third of radio-collared female deer in the area died from May 2015-May 2016, and fawn recruitment was reduced. Populations have declined, but the largest impact on harvest might not be seen until 2017 or 2018 since most harvest is on two or three-year old bucks.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teanaway), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

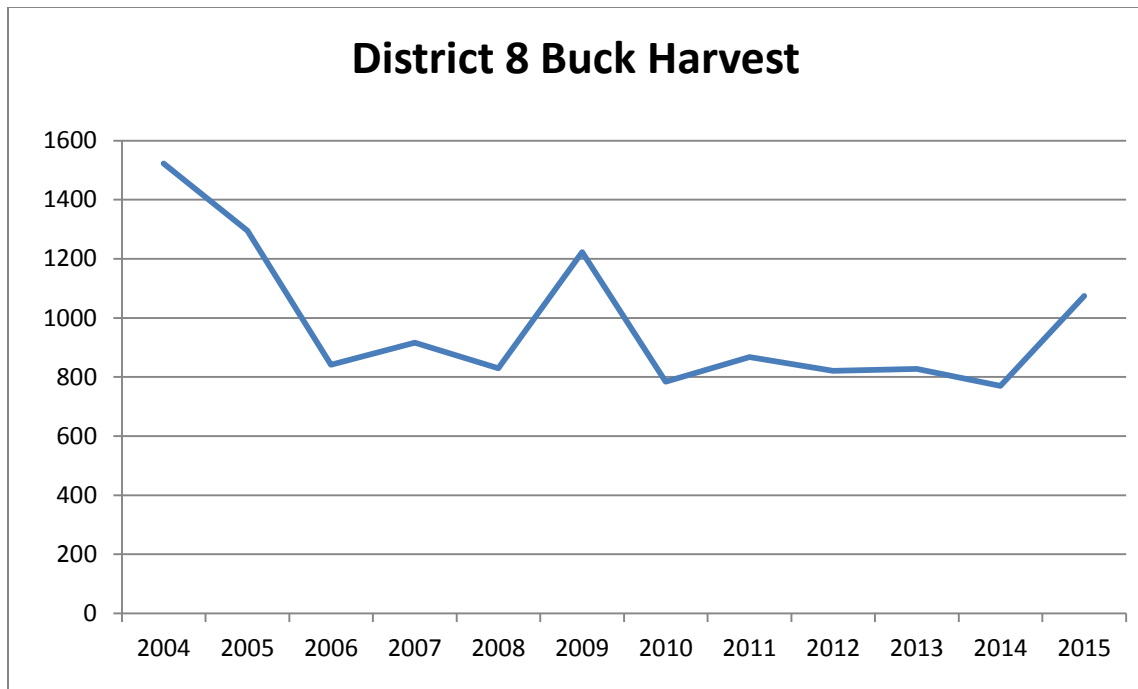


Figure 3. District 8 buck harvest.

WATERFOWL

The USFWS flyway has not yet published the 2016 breeding population estimates. The 2014 and 2015 estimates were 43% above the long term average, yet harvest in District 8 was below average (Figure 4). For local hunters, total ducks in the flyway probably isn't as important as local hunting conditions and available food.

Yakima County has averaged over 31,000 ducks harvested the last five years, which is third best in the state. The 2015 season started with drought conditions, and many wetlands were dry. In mid-November, floods occurred, followed by cold weather. Brief periods of good hunting were often cut short by freezes.

Above normal temperatures and precipitation are predicted for October-December 2016, followed by a cold January.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). A Marsh Master was just purchased by WDFW for improving waterfowl habitat and hunting access on SWA. Marshes previously choked with vegetation should be opened up in 2016. There are also plans for producing more grain in the rice paddies. Waterfowl hunting should be better than in the past on SWA and hunters should explore wetlands that were previously hard to hunt.

TPNWR has had difficulty filling wetlands in October. Water is dictated by flows in Toppenish Creek. The Robbins wetlands cannot be filled unless minimum flows are reached in Toppenish Creek, and Pumpouse wetlands are dependent on side channels to fill in higher flows. Before making a trip to TPNWR, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions. Hunting can be excellent when wetlands are filled.

The Yakama Nation maintains a public hunting program and there are great duck hunting opportunities on the reservation. The Yakama Nation-managed Satus Wildlife Area often averages over four birds per hunter opening weekend. The Satus wetlands depend on good flows in the Yakima River. Low summer flows have allowed Yakama Nation to mow and open up more Satus wetlands than normal the last two years. Fall river levels are still to be determined. If long-range forecasts are correct, wetlands should be in good condition.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early-to-mid season often sees good hunting on locally produced and migrant native birds. Late season hunting can be difficult. Most ponds and sloughs freeze over around Thanksgiving. When there are long periods of cold weather, the majority of ducks roost in the Lower Toppenish Reserve during legal shooting hours. Even if the Yakima River stays ice-free, few birds are flying around areas with public access. For late season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see [Let's Go Waterfowling](#).

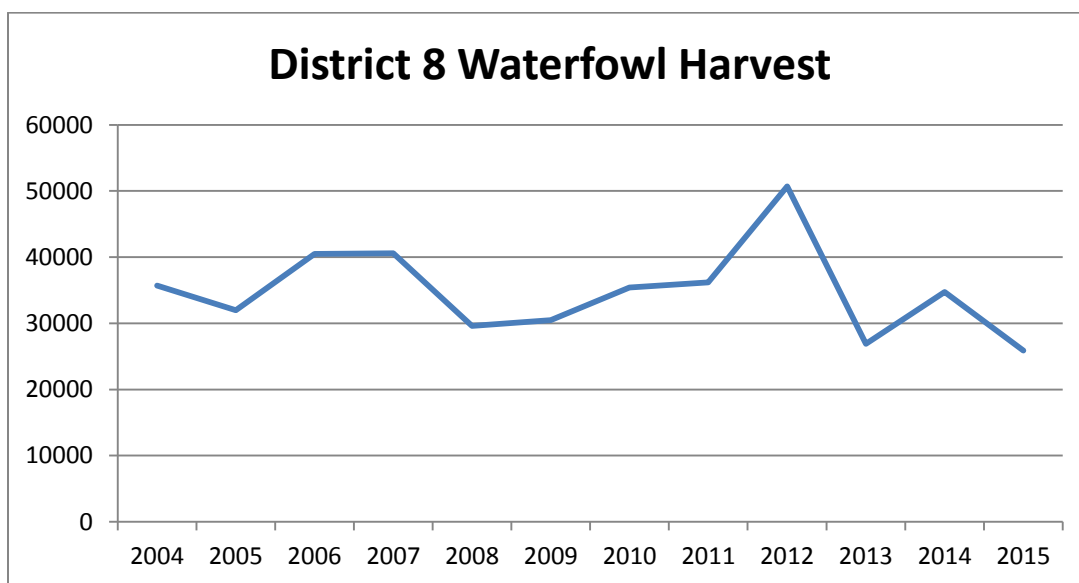


Figure 4. District 8 waterfowl harvest.

DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. The best success is in the lower Yakima Valley. Good public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area and the Yakima Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting on Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

Dove hunting success typically depends on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves. Harvest and hunter numbers have generally been declining since 2011 (Figure 5).

The prospects for 2016 do not appear to be good at this time. A banding program started in 2003 has found most harvested birds are produced locally. Observations and trapping success indicate extremely poor production in 2016. The reasons are unknown, but generally expect fairly low populations that are mostly older, wiser birds.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunity, as the season extends year round, without limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically in the last six years. No information is collected on harvest, but collared doves are now very common. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to act more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunity at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

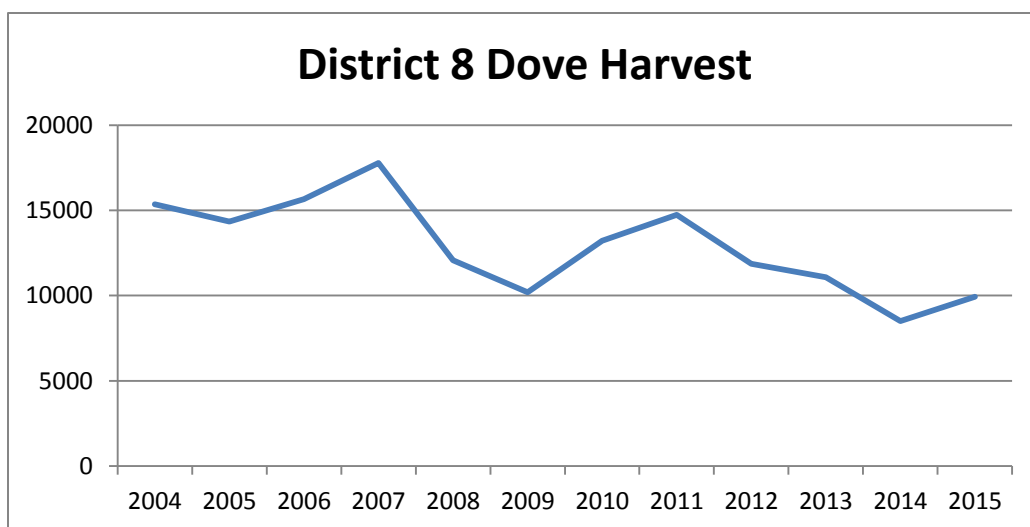


Figure 5. District 8 dove harvest.

FOREST GROUSE



Recent grouse harvest in District 8 increased slightly from the low in 2013 (Figure 6). Total harvest decreased slightly in 2015, but there were fewer hunters days reported. Harvest per day increased, but was still only 0.3 birds per day. No data are available on the 2016 hatch. Early spring 2016 was warmer than normal and there was good moisture. The only concern is that temperatures were very low in mid-June. Night time temperatures were often in the 30s and often approached freezing. Low temperatures can reduce food (insects) and even kill young chicks.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are the most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

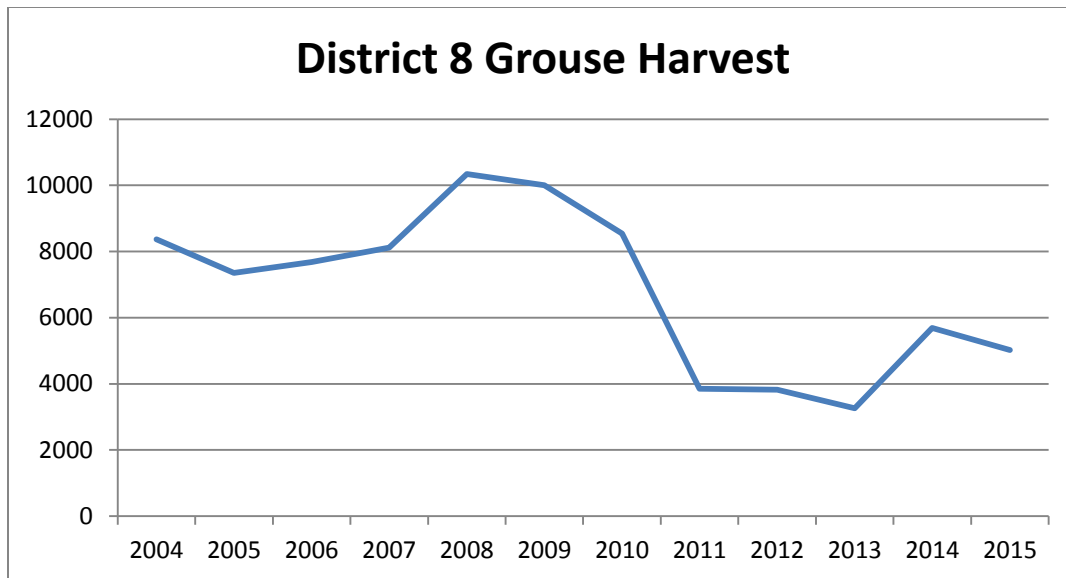


Figure 6. District 8 grouse harvest.

PHEASANT

The 2015 pheasant harvest in District 8 was one the lowest in recent history and continued the long-term decline (Figure 7). There are very few wild pheasant in the district outside of the Lower Yakima Valley on the Yakama Nation Reservation. The trend on the Yakama Nation Reservation has been for declining pheasant populations due to conversion from idle land to crops. There has been no change in this trend. Even when grain prices declined, farmers switched to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult. More moisture is usually better than less. For example, after the severe winter of 1996-97 and a cool 1997 spring, pheasant harvest increased 40 percent in Yakima County. All upland game birds re-nest. Even the worst spring weather can provide excellent cover and insects for the late hatch.

A warm spring can provide good nesting cover and insect production for the early hatch, provided there is enough soil moisture. Spring came early to the Yakima Valley and there was adequate moisture. One concern was the rapid melt of mountain snow and frequent flooding. Any birds nesting in low areas near creeks or rivers may have had early nests wiped out. Re-nesting conditions were potentially good with high soil moisture. Unfortunately, the reality is that pheasant populations are low and scattered in the Yakima Valley. Even with a good hatch, the small weed patches can only produce small numbers of birds. Hunting will typically only be good for a few weeks on public lands as hatch-year birds get harvested or educated.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. Yakama Nation conducts production surveys and posts their data in late summer. For information on surveys and hunting the Yakama Nation Reservation, visit ynwildlife.org.

Released pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 2,000 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2016 allocation has not been set, but about 1000 birds are expected at the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 600 at Cottonwoods, and 400 at Whiskey Dick. For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. The local chapter of Pheasants Forever (PF) has been raising pheasant in surrogators and releasing at Sunnyside and on the Yakama Nation Reservation. The Yakama Nation also raises and releases birds over the summer. Research in Nebraska found only 12 percent of surrogator raised pheasant survived to hunting season, 3.5 percent were harvested, and only 1 percent survived one year. The surrogator raised birds might help maintain some harvest, but will have no positive affect on population.

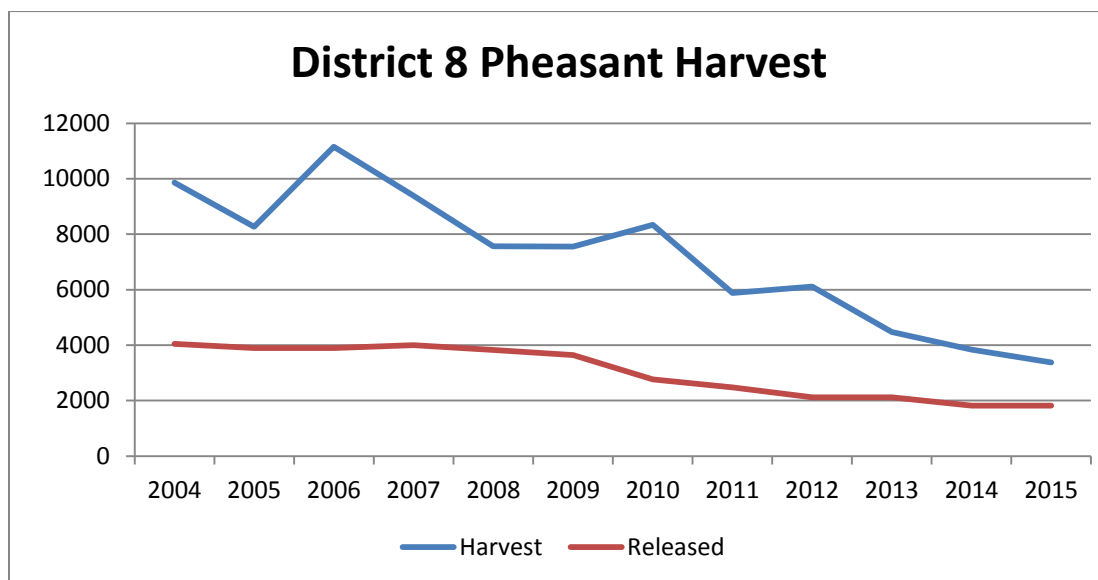


Figure 7. District 8 pheasant harvest.

QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail can be found in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 24,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 2,700.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 8). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the Yakama Nation Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds. Quail are often secondary quarry to pheasant hunters. The lack of pheasant and

pheasant hunters might be contributing to the decline in total harvest. Yakama Nation will post quail survey numbers later this summer.

The quail population going into the 2016 season is very difficult to judge. The winter of 2015-16 was likely hard on quail. Persistent snow cover in the northern half of the district resulted in higher than normal winter mortality. The highest densities of quail are along the riparian areas in the lower Yakima Valley. The Yakima River and tributaries flooded frequently, winter through spring. The best habitat was often underwater, forcing quail to concentrate in marginal habitat. The floods also washed away seeds favored by quail. Additional mortality occurred, but it is difficult to measure impacts to the population. Hard winters are rare in the main quail zone. The two most severe winters in 30 years occurred in 1992-93 and 1996-97. Quail harvest in the region decreased 53 percent after winter 1992-93, but increased 42 percent after 1996-97. It is unclear where 2016 will fall in the range.

Quail can produce large clutches and quickly rebound from winter mortality. Early spring was warm and vegetation growth above normal. Unfortunately, the riparian areas were often flooded throughout the spring. When the water dropped, so did temperatures. Night temperatures were often in the 30s and approached freezing in mid-June. Low temperatures can reduce food (insects) and even kill young chicks. Quail are persistent re-nesters and will take advantage of the new vegetation and insect production later in the season. It's not unusual to see good hatches in late August or early September.

The highest quail populations are typically along the lower Yakima River. WDFW owns various parcels along the river that hold good numbers of quail and are part of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunity. For information on surveys and hunting Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

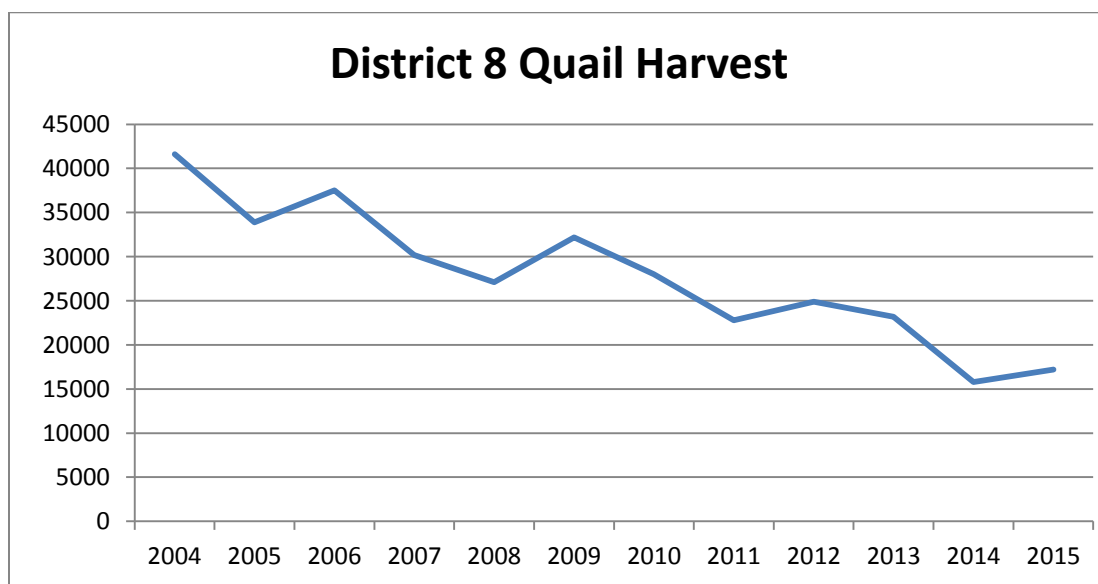


Figure 8. District 8 quail harvest.

Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation

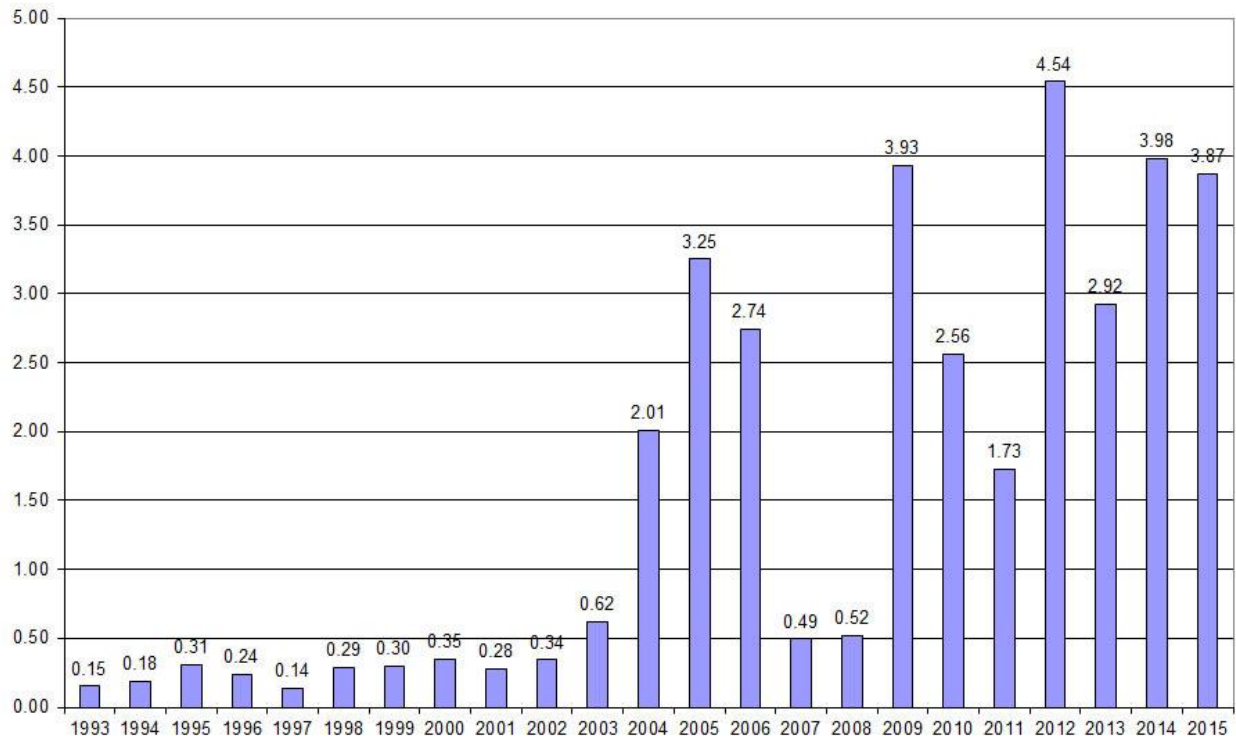


Figure 9. Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Nation Reservation.

TURKEY



Turkey populations had been doing fairly well in the district following releases in the late 1990s, but are now declining (Figure 10). It is not unusual for newly established populations to reach high numbers before declining to a lower level. Most of the harvest in the district comes from the northern portion (GMUs 328 [Naneum], 329 [Quilomene], and 335 [Teaway]). The best populations early in the spring are on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teaway Community Forest.

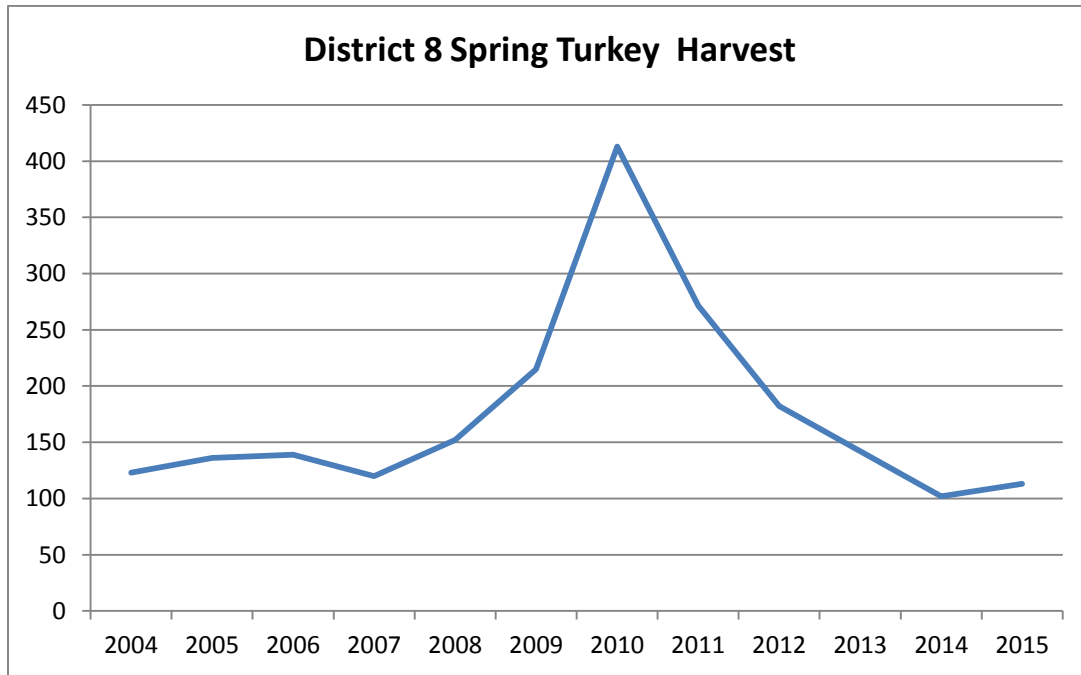


Figure 10. District 8 spring turkey harvest.

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in 2015 rebounded after four years of steady decline (Figure 11). The rebound in populations was not district wide. North of I-90 and along the western portions of chukar range in Yakima County, populations were high in 2015. In the drier central and eastern portions of the district, bird populations remained very low.

The winter of 2015-16 was likely hard on partridge. Snow was not deep, but persistent all winter, and there was generally a lack of sun to open slopes of snow. Concentrations of birds did survive in some pockets, but not uniformly across the range.

No information is available on the 2016 hatch. Chukars generally do well with high soil moisture, which was the case in 2016. Other than some cold weather in mid-June, good hatches would be expected where birds survived winter.

There is plenty of public land for partridge hunting in the district. The best populations are expected on the Quilomene and Colockum wildlife areas, where birds may have found more open terrain during winter near the Columbia River. The western portions of the Wenas Wildlife Area and eastern end of the Oak Creek Wildlife Area have had good populations in recent years and enough very steep terrain that some birds should have survived the winter. Populations are not expected to be very high on the Yakima Training Center. Recent fires, lack of shrub cover, and snow have probably kept the populations depressed.

The Yakima Training Center used to be a very popular spot for upland bird hunters. Decreased access due to military training and increased restrictions have limited the number of Yakima Training Center upland bird hunters the last five years. Access to Yakima Training Center in fall 2016 is unknown at this writing. Note that I.D requirements have changed. Hunters must go through a brief orientation, pay a \$10 fee, and register their firearms with Yakima Training Center. For more information on the orientation and rules on Yakima Training Center, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

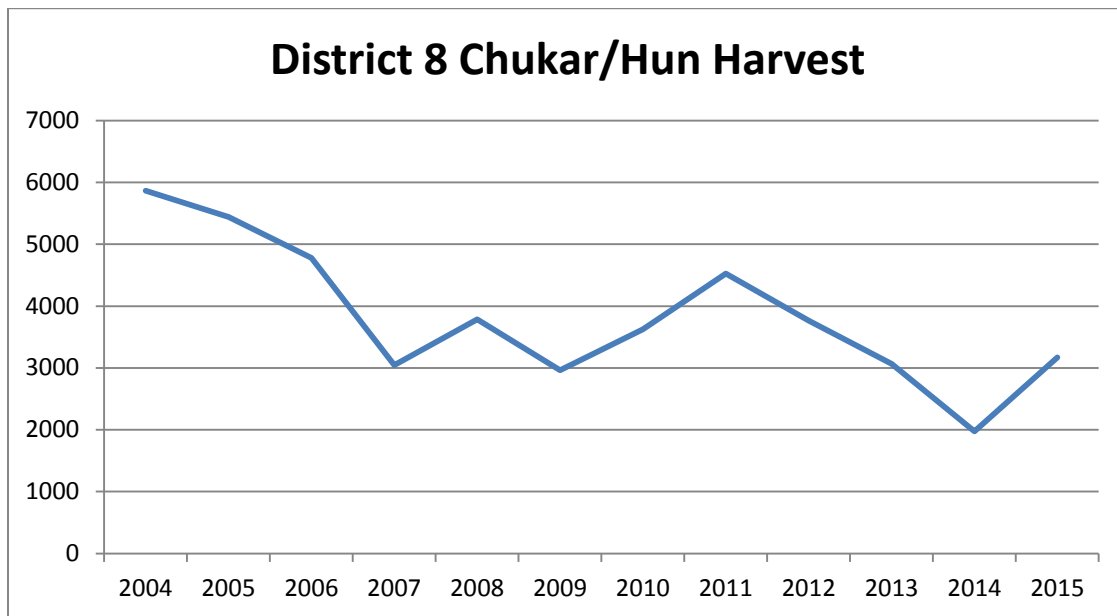


Figure 11. District 8 chukar/hun harvest.